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French researchers face winter of discontent

Entering a power struggle with their national government, more than 2,000 senior French researchers resigned from their managerial duties on 9 March, protesting the “planned destruction of France’s research capacity.” The revolt proceeded in spite of last-minute conciliatory attempts by the president of the Academy of Sciences, and pleas from Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin not to “weaken the country’s international scientific reputation.”

The mass resignation topped off months of protests, sparked in January by a web petition called *Let’s Save Research* (<http://www.recherche-en-danger.apinc.org>). The petition, signed by nearly 70,000 researchers, accused the French government of shutting down the public research sector despite previous promises to strengthen it. Cut or frozen funds, petitioners claimed, have left institutes such as the Institute for Health and Medical Research (INSERM) on the verge of bankruptcy, and young researchers desperate for jobs.

“Dramatic budget cuts and freezes have built frustration,” says Gérard Friedlander, who resigned as head of a physiology lab at INSERM. What set the protests in motion, he says, was the sudden cancellation of hundreds of permanent positions, most of them already promised to postdoctoral fellows ready to return from abroad.

After trade unions joined the fight, the government, eager to prevent protests before the elections, made some concessions. It released €294 million that had been ‘frozen’, resurrected 120 of 550 permanent positions cancelled last year, added 300 temporary posts, promised salary increases and invited rebel representatives to a conference on the future of French research. Raffarin also promised to set aside an extra €3 billion for research between 2005 and 2007.

But the government refused to budge on one

key demand—reversing course on converting hundreds of permanent positions into three- and five-year employment contracts. Such contracts, says research minister Claudie Haigneré, are common in many countries and will provide much-needed recruitment flexibility for short-term research projects.

But the problem is the lack of options once the contracts end, says biologist Bruno Goud, group leader at the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris and one of the protest organizers. “The government has no plan for what happens next,” Goud says.

The resignations are unlikely to be accepted by institute directors, which makes them largely symbolic. Protest organizers have promised large street protests in Paris on 19 March if the government does not meet their demands. In the meantime, they have called on their colleagues to refuse research evaluations and halt communication with the Ministry of Research.

With many European budgets in retreat, French researchers are not the only ones taking to the streets. In Italy, plans to turn permanent research positions into three- or five-year contracts ignited days of protest on university campuses. And in the UK, university teachers and students held strikes and demonstrations over failed pay negotiations and plans to allow some universities to raise their fees.

Peter Vermij, Amsterdam



French scientists take to the streets in protest.

Reuters/Jean-Paul Pelissier, JPP/CRB France Marseille

New US watchdog to create scientific ‘culture of responsibility’

US officials have announced plans to create a new committee to tackle issues raised by so-called ‘dual use’ biological research. Wary of schemes to regulate biological research, most observers are reserving judgment until the panel begins its work.

Officials from the US Department of Health and Human Services on 4 March announced a plan to launch a National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity by early summer. The new board is the Bush administration’s latest effort to address the potential threat from dual-use research—work that can be applied for both peaceful and offensive purposes.

Panelists will not review individual research proposals unless they highlight new questions

or areas of concern, said Elias Zerhouni, director of the US National Institutes of Health. The board will suggest guidelines for institutional biosecurity committees, which oversee research on recombinant DNA, but the guidelines will not be mandatory unless enacted by institutions or oversight bodies, he said.

The idea behind the scheme is to define best practices to help scientists become more aware of biosecurity issues, Zerhouni said. “This is trying to create a culture of responsibility.”

Previous government initiatives, such as the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act, have set new rules and created more hassles for researchers. Research advocacy groups say they are pleased that officials have said the new panel will maintain

scientific openness and freedom to conduct research, rather than create laws. Experts say the approach could be crucial to the board’s success.

“If the scientific community sees this regime as something to be afraid of or have to suffer through, it won’t get them thinking about what they need to do,” says Gerald Epstein, senior fellow for science and security at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Board members will include representatives from government agencies that support life sciences research, as well as experts in health, science, security, law and other fields. The board is set to have a starting budget of about \$3 million and a 13-member support staff, officials said.

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